gobar times

Issue no. 266, July 1–31, 2024

A DOWN TO EARTH SUPPLEMENT FOR THE YOUNG AND CURIOUS

Slithering PYTHON TALES

Read fascinating serpentine stories and mind-blowing fun facts to scale your sensitivity towards our wild, fang-filled world in this edition!

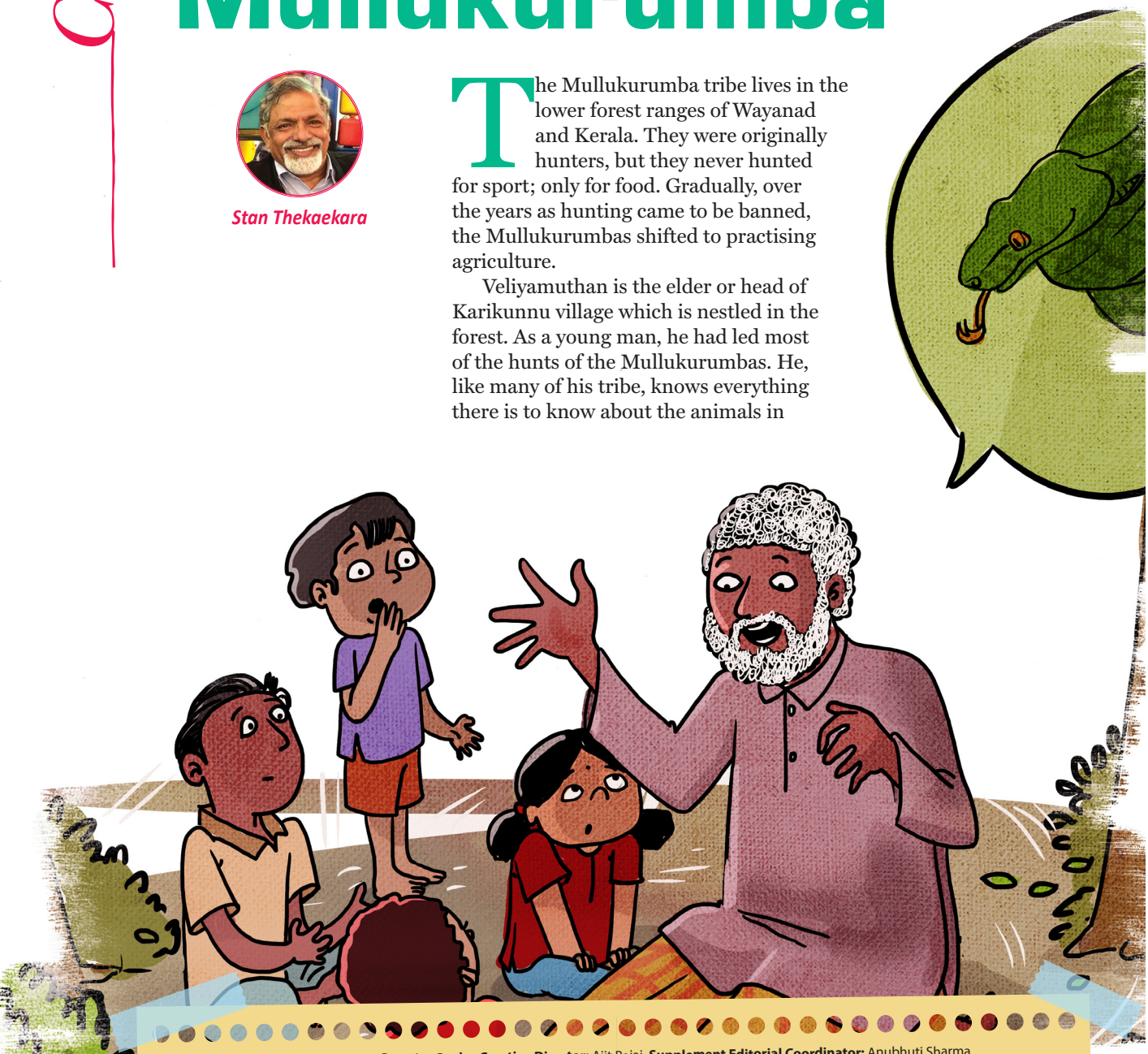
Cover Story

Pythons, a 'Magic' Mound, and the Mullukurumba

Stan Thekaekara

The Mullukurumba tribe lives in the lower forest ranges of Wayanad and Kerala. They were originally hunters, but they never hunted for sport; only for food. Gradually, over the years as hunting came to be banned, the Mullukurumbas shifted to practising agriculture.

Veliyamuthan is the elder or head of Karikunnu village which is nestled in the forest. As a young man, he had led most of the hunts of the Mullukurumbas. He, like many of his tribe, knows everything there is to know about the animals in



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the surrounding jungle. He no longer hunts, but is a storehouse of knowledge about the forest and the animals that live in them.

One day, when he was resting under a jackfruit tree, some children came running excitedly.

Children: *Muthachen (grandpa), muthachen, come and see. We found a magic mound of grass!*

Veliyamuthan: *What? Why is it magic?*

Children: *We were playing and sat on this mound to take some rest and the mound moved! It's alive, it's alive! Come muthachen, come, we will show you.*

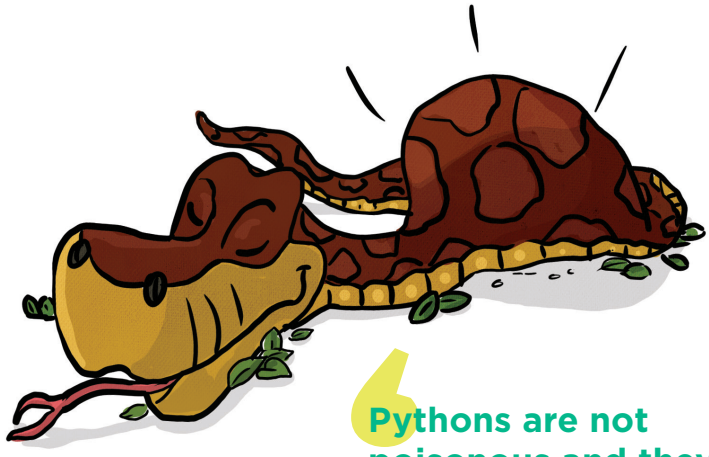
Veliyamuthan immediately knew what it was but he pretended to be as amazed as the children. Taking his hand, they led him into the forest. And sure enough, there was this mound of grass and if you watched closely you could see it move.

Children: *What is it muthachen? Is there a spirit inside? Is it a magic mound?*

Veliyamuthan realised it was time to explain to the children one more fascinating titbit of knowledge of the forest and its animals. He calmed the children down and led them a little distance away under the shade of another jackfruit tree.

Veliyamuthan: *Come and sit around here, children, and I will tell you about the magic mound that moves.*

Children: *So, it really is magic?*



Pythons are not poisonous and they by and large do not pose a threat to humans. We are not their natural prey. The ball python are very docile and make good pets.

Veliyamuthan: *Well, yes and no. Mother Nature does things that seem magical to us humans, but actually they are a part and parcel of how everything is.*

Children: *But tell us what is the magic that makes the mound move! I think there is a spirit hiding inside. I think the mound is actually a living being. But it has no legs, no eyes—how can it move? It has to be magic!*

The children kept coming up with various theories to explain the mystery of the moving mound. Veliyamuthan quietened them.

Veliyamuthan: *I will explain everything, but first you have to promise me you will sit still and be very, very quiet. If you do, you will see something truly amazing.*

The children were quiet instantly and didn't move a muscle. Their eyes were transfixed on to their magic mound. And even as they watched, the mound started wriggling around even more.

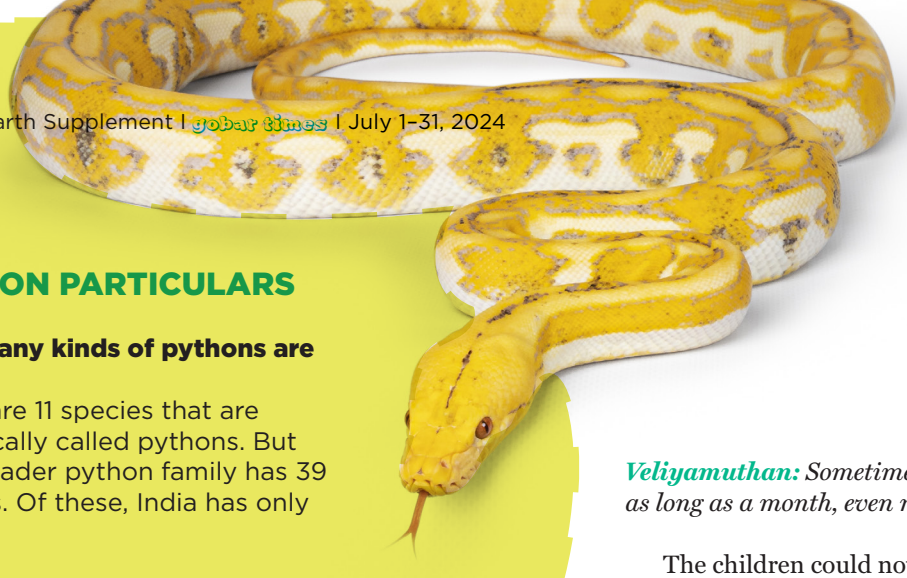
Slowly a head appeared, followed by a body, sliding and slithering and finally with a big twist it shook off all the mud and grass. It was a SNAKE! A very long and very big snake! A PYTHON!

The children gasped. They could not believe their eyes. Veliyamuthan plucked a ripe jackfruit, cut it open, and started feeding the children as he continued with his story.

Veliyamuthan: *When a python swallows a big animal like a deer, it takes very long to digest it; because its stomach becomes so big, it cannot move around easily. So it curls up and lies down very quietly in one place till all the food is digested.*

Children: *And how long does that take muthachen?*

"Guess," asked Veliyamuthan. The children guessed – a day? Three days? A week? To all their guesses, he just shook his head.



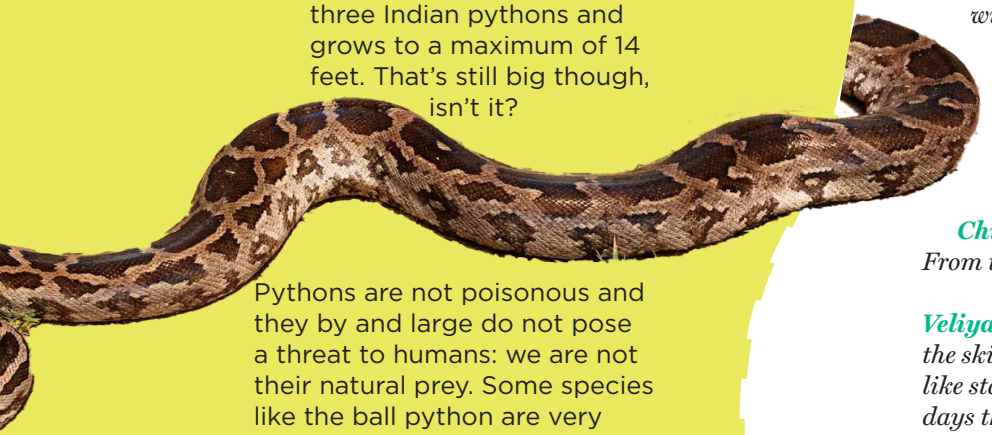
PYTHON PARTICULARS

How many kinds of pythons are there?
There are 11 species that are specifically called pythons. But the broader python family has 39 species. Of these, India has only three:

I **The Reticulated Python** would win the gold for the world's heavyweight champion. It can grow up to 30 feet long and weigh as much as a 100 kg. While it is the longest snake, it is not the heaviest. That distinction belongs to the Green Anaconda, which is a boa and not a python.

II Next in line is the **Burmese Python.** it can grow up to 20 feet. It is not very common in India. As its name indicates, it probably sneaked into India from Burma (Myanmar) and is mainly found in the northeast.

III The most common is the **Indian Rock Python.** It can be found all over the country. This is the smallest of the three Indian pythons and grows to a maximum of 14 feet. That's still big though, isn't it?



Pythons are not poisonous and they by and large do not pose a threat to humans: we are not their natural prey. Some species like the ball python are very docile and make good pets.

Veliyamuthan: *Sometimes it can be as long as a month, even more...*

The children could not believe what they were hearing. A month in one place? Without moving?

Veliyamuthan: *But look at the python. Can you see how slowly she is moving? That is because she has become too heavy. All her food has become fat since she has had no exercise for so long... Do you know that her fat is very good medicine? When a python is full of fat, we gently trap it by pinning it down to the ground with Y shaped sticks. The python cannot move. We then take a very thin sharp piece of bamboo. But we are careful to take the piece from inside the bamboo and not from the outside. Do you know why?*

The children shook their heads.

Veliyamuthan: *Because the outside can be dirty and have a lot of germs and bacteria. On the inside, it will be pure and sterile. We use the piece of bamboo like a blade and gently slice just the skin of the python near its stomach. Under the skin you will find the fat that looks like a necklace of beads. We pull this out completely. Then we make small needles from the bamboo. From the inside or outside?"*

Children (shouting in unison): *From the inside!*

Veliyamuthan: *Yes. And then we join the skin back with these needles. It's like stapling the skin back. In a few days the cut will heal and the skin will rejoin.*

Cover Story

Children: *But what about the fat, muthachen?*

Veliyamuthan: *Ah, we melt it and store it. And we use it as a medicine for healing wounds and for skin problems and many other ailments.*

Children: *Is that what is* on *the shelf at home? Along with the other bottles?*

Veliyamuthan: *Yes, animals give us a lot of things. So, we should learn to live with animals.*

Instead of killing the python, we do an operation!! And the python lives on.

In fact, you know what my grandfather used to tell me? He said that the python is very happy when we remove the fat because after the operation it can move easily and faster. And so every time it has eaten a big animal and has a lot of fat and finds it difficult to move, it comes to our village and waits for us to do another operation!!!

The Mullukurumbas melt and store python fat. They use it as a medicine for healing wounds and for skin problems and many other ailments.

Children: *But muthachen there is one bottle at home which has some stinky stuff. What is that?*

Veliyamuthan: *The stinky one is from the porcupine. Ah, but that's another story. It's late now. Let's go home.*

And they all walked back to the village filled with the wonders and mysteries of nature. One of the children, a little girl, summed up everyone's thoughts when she said, "we have so much to learn from nature".

The author is the Founder of Just Change India and the Co-Founder of ACCORD in Nilgiris district, Tamil Nadu. Having lived and worked with Adivasi communities for close to 50 years, he is a repository of many tribal folk stories.

ON THE WALL

PYTHON FACTS UNCOILED!

Stan Thekaekara

PYTHONS COULD DO WITH GLASSES

Pythons have pretty poor eyesight. But they have a super power. Heat sensors! These are on their lips. From the heat radiated from their prey, they can find them even in the dark!

MUMMY MUMMY...

Pythons, like most reptiles, are very maternal. Some lay up to a hundred eggs. The mother then coils around to keep them warm until they hatch, which can be up to 90 days! She never leaves them even to feed herself!! Mother's love at its best.

SUPER SNIFFERS

Pythons have an incredible sense of smell. Some of them can detect scents which are 10,000 times fainter than what we can identify!! Maybe, they can be trained as police pythons!!

DRESSED TO KILL

Pythons, like other snakes, grow continuously throughout their lives and shed their skin regularly. It's like getting new clothes every now and then. Younger pythons are more fashion conscious and shed their old skin at least once a month. Adults, maybe every quarter!

ID CARDS

Python skins are like ID cards. Each python has a unique skin pattern, like a fingerprint.

CHEW YOUR FOOD!

Have you been often told to do that? But pythons don't! They swallow their food whole!! They crush their prey with their powerful muscles and kill them right away.

Gobar Ratings

BOOK REVIEW

THE GIRL WHO WAS A FOREST

JANAKI AMMAL

Lavanya Karthik's delightfully narrated and illustrated biography of Janaki Ammal, a path-breaking woman scientist in colonial India, inspires young readers.

Nandita Banerji

Edavalath Kakkat Janaki Ammal was one of India's first female scientists, but before she broke glass ceilings, she was just a little girl in Kerala's seaside town of Thalassery. The short, illustrated biography by Lavanya Karthik charmingly captures her story, looking for a dream world away from her hometown with rigid rules.

The book is Janaki's journey from being a seed to a blossoming forest. The storytelling is captivating even though the narrative is short—there are barely a line or two per page. Even then, the biography perfectly encapsulates the dreariness in Janaki's life and the angst for more.

Thalassery is beautiful but to Janaki, it's suffocating. The very first depiction of the town in a beautiful green monochromatic colour scheme, shows Janaki barred in a house behind a window.

There are binding rules for girls. They don't need to go to school, must marry early and start a family. They extend to her looks and family background too—she belongs to a lower caste, which is not "good enough". She is criticized for being too tall, too plain and too different as well.

She finds a new, secret world to escape to—her father's joy for nature. He loves watching birds in the mangrove forests nearby and inspires Janaki to be a part of it, like a bird that can fly away from her confining town.

Janaki's relationship with her father takes centre stage in the story and is the loveliest part of the book. It reflects the emotions felt by so many girls trapped by the expectations of society. Her father's quiet encouragement is joyful and reassuring. He gives her hope that she can be her own and we see a glimpse of how he nurtured a seed of hope in her.

While the book engages the reader, one is left knowing very little about Janaki. Born in 1897, she was behind the creation of several hybrid crops grown even today. The biography contains just one instance from her life and the reader longs to know more.

The epilogue tells us that Janaki is the reason sugarcane in India is as sweet as it is today. Janaki was a botanist at a time few women around the world, let alone in British-colonised India, had access to education. She was a pioneer of indigenous approaches to the environment and a tenacious advocate for the protection of India's native plants.

While the book touched on the barriers she faced, the magnitude of her struggles is missing. Granted, the book is for youngsters and encourages them into the endless world of pages, they are left wanting to learn more about Janaki's heroic journey of overcoming the boundaries of gender and caste.

The author is a Senior Sub-Editor, Down To Earth, Centre for Science and Environment, New Delhi.

In lieu of the Modi era, the Budget 2024-25 took a step forward from 2021 when PM Modi launched 35 crop varieties to address climate change and malnutrition. FM Nirmala Sitharaman announced that new 109 high-yielding and climate-resilient varieties of 32 crops will be released for farmers in this financial year. The govt will undertake comprehensive review of research to develop climate resilient seeds.

Ishika Gandhi/GT